The Changing U.S. Farm Population

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The U.S. farm population, unlike our growing urban and rural nonfarm populations, has declined almost continuously since early in this century.

Today, only 8 million or 4 percent of the Nation's 218 million people are farm residents. When first counted in the 1920 census, the 32 million farm people accounted for nearly a third of the total population of 106 million.

The basic components of population change are births, deaths, and migration. While high levels of natural increase—the excess of births over deaths—have characterized the farm population, heavy net outmigration of farm people has more than offset these increases. Thus, the long-term net outmovement of persons from farm to nonfarm areas is the major contributor to the well-documented downward trend in the number of farm residents.

By definition, the farm population consists of persons living on rural places designated as farms. Data on net change in this population through migration include not only the loss that occurs through the actual physical movement of persons from farm to nonfarm areas, but also persons living on places reclassified as nonfarm because agricultural operations ceased. Although the exact effect of such reclassification is unknown, more people are thought to be involved in actual outmovement than in the reclassification of residence from farm to nonfarm. However, indications are that the incidence of reclassification is not negligible and, in fact, the proportion being reclassified may be on the increase. This is not surprising in view of the renewed growth of rural areas and small towns of the United States during the 1970's. Such renewed growth leads to the creation of more local job opportunities, allowing farm workers on marginal operations to cease their farming activities and commute to jobs elsewhere.

Between 1970 and 1977, a net average loss of 300,000 people occurred annually in the farm population through migration and reclassification of residence. The rate of this net outmovement, where the average amount of migration is expressed as a percentage of the average population, was 3.3 percent annually for the 7-year period.

Both the absolute and relative loss of farm people through migration in the 1970's has declined substantially from previous decades. During the 1940's and 1950's, net outmigration from farms averaged a million people per year. Net outmovement in the 1960's declined to about 700,000 annually. However, this reduction in the volume of outmigration was a reflection of the diminishing farm population base from which migrants are drawn rather than a decrease in the propensity to move. The volume declined, but the rate of net outmovement remained at about the same level until the 1970's.

Distribution and Composition—Until the middle of this century, the South was the most populous region in terms of number of farm residents. However, persistently heavier rates of loss, traditionally associated with mechanization of cotton production and the near abandonment of the share-tenant system of farming, resulted in a declining southern share of the national farm total.

The North Central region, less subject to such drastic changes in agricultural structure, experienced lower rates of farm population loss. These regional variations in population decrease persisted into the 1970's, and today the North Central States are the most populous region, with 3.6 million farm residents, or 46 percent of the total. The South, which as late as 1950 contained more than half of the Nation's farm population, now has little more than a third and ranks second. The Northeast and West have historically had smaller numbers of farm people and in 1977 contained only 10 percent and 12 percent, respectively, of the total farm population.

Despite dwindling size and other demographic changes, the farm population still has more males than females. In 1977, farms had 109 males for every 100 females, compared with only 93 males for every 100 females among nonfarm residents. The greater number of males on farms reflects higher rates of outmigration of females. One contributing factor is the basically physical nature of farming. Four-fifths of all persons

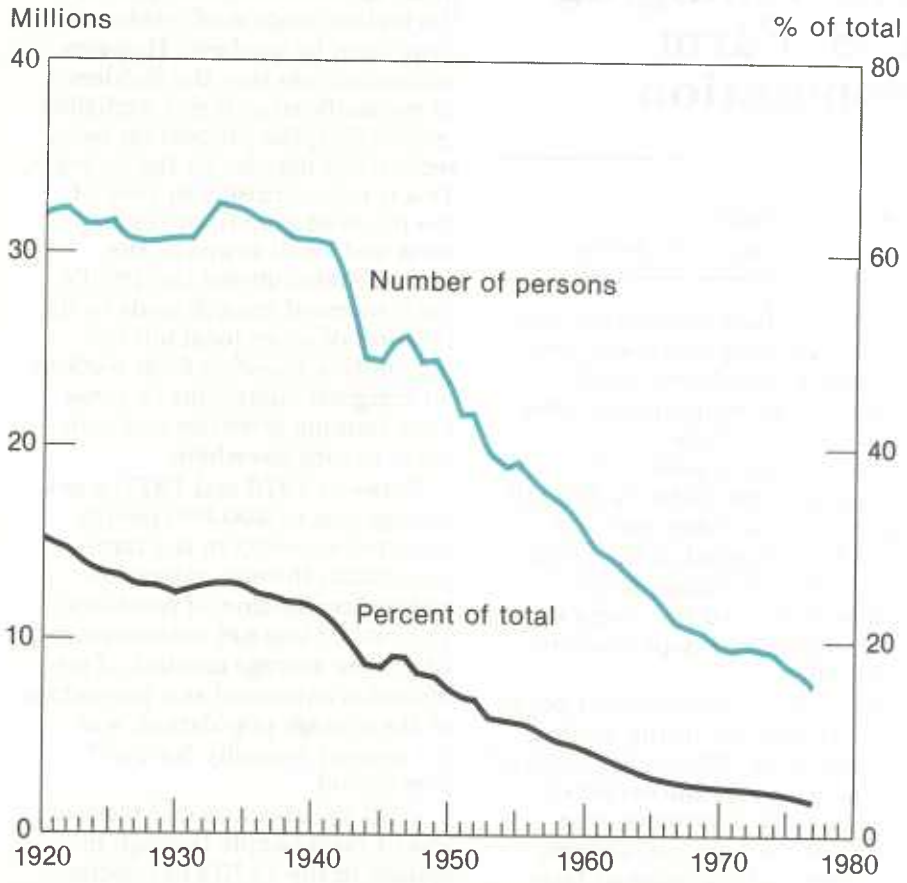
employed in agriculture in 1977 were male.

Another distinctive feature of the farm population is its declining black segment. As a result of heavy outmovement, the black share of the farm total has steadily dropped, while that for whites has increased accordingly. Today's farm population has a lower proportion of blacks than does the nonfarm population. When data on the farm population by race first became available, blacks constituted 17 percent of all farm residents, but by the late 1970's only 400,000, or 5 percent, were black. The sharp decline in the black farm population has been associated with heavy losses in the number of cotton and tobacco farms, where blacks have always had a disproportionate representation.

Continuous population loss, particularly among young adults of childbearing age, and the recent decline in the birth rate have altered the age structure of farm people. For years the farm population was characterized as "young." In fact, as recently as 1960, children under 14 years of age represented a third of all farm people. But significantly higher rates of decline among younger age groups continually reduced their share of the farm total. In the 1970-77 period, the proportion of children in the farm population fell from 26 percent to 20 percent. Consequently, the farm population now contains a higher percent of persons 55 years old and over than the nonfarm population, and a slightly lower proportion of children under age 14. Differences in the farm and nonfarm age structure are readily apparent from their median ages. Farm residents in 1977 had a median age of 35.2 years, compared with 29.1 years for nonfarm residents.

Figure 1

Farm Population



Tenure status—Farm tenure relates to the respective rights of the farm operator in the use of land and other resources required in agricultural production. Tenure arrangements affect the way land is used and the quantities of capital and labor used in conjunction with the land. The three major tenure classes are (1) full owners—those who own all the land they operate; (2) part owners—those who own part and rent part of their land; and (3) tenants—those who rent all their land or work on shares for others.

The farm population, classified by the tenure status of the operator on whose farm they live, is predominantly on farms run by a full owner. In 1977, 56 percent of the Nation's 8.2 million farm people lived on full-owner farms, a little more than a third resided on part-owner operations, and only a tenth were on tenant farms.

This distribution among the three groups has not changed significantly since 1970, although some minor variations may be noted. All three tenure groups experienced population loss during 1970-77, but the part-owner group had a substantially lower rate of decline than the other two, and as a result, increased its share of the total farm population by 6 percentage points. These findings are consistent with earlier reports that indicate part-owner operations have become increasingly important, and now account for more than half of all U.S. farmland.

Between 1970 and 1977, the rate of decline for black farm residents was greater than that for whites, regardless of tenure status. But for both races, the rate of loss was comparatively lower for the part-owner group and this group's share of the total increased for both white and black farm populations. By 1977, nearly equal proportions of the black farm total resided on full-owner and part-owner operations, but whites were still more heavily concentrated on full-owner farms. A sizable difference existed between the racial proportions on tenant farms. Historically, blacks have been more associated with the tenant system of farming, and as of 1977, were twice as likely to live on such places as were whites.

Type of farm—The distribution of farm people by type of farm has not changed significantly in recent years. The majority of both white and black farm populations live on livestock and cash-grain farms. In 1977, these farm types accounted for 66 percent and 52 percent of the two racial groups, respectively. But white farm residents not on livestock or cash-grain farms were most likely located on dairy farms, while blacks most typically lived on tobacco farms. Premechanized tobacco farming was particularly suitable to the share-tenant system of southern farming, so it is not surprising that many blacks, by heritage and geographic location, are found on this type of operation.

Because factors associated with the various types of agriculture differ from one region to another, geographic concentrations may be observed in the distribution of farms and farm people by type. For example, farm residents of the North and West are as likely to live on livestock as on cash-grain farms. Each of these types contained about a third of the regional farm total in 1977. But in the South, a disproportionately large share of farm residents are located on livestock farms—nearly half of the total. The second and third most populous types in the South were cash-grain and tobacco farms, with each accounting for about a fifth of the regional total. In the combined North and West, however, dairy farms ranked third.

Economic class of farm—As recently as 1975, fairly small-scale farms contained the largest portion of the farm population. These operations, with agricultural sales of $50 to $2,499, were typically family-run enterprises, employing little hired help and making a relatively small contribution to overall agricultural production. Such farms do not compete well against larger scale operations or alternative nonfarm uses for the land, and as a result, have been declining for years. The largest share of the farm population, roughly 28 percent, now live on farms having agricultural product sales of $40,000 or more. These farms tend to be large-scale operations and contribute the most to total cash receipts from farming. Persons on farms in this sales category have practically doubled in number since 1970, while population loss marked all other sales classes.

A larger proportion of blacks than whites live on places in the $40,000 and over sales group. However, the vast majority of blacks on such places are in hired worker or other nonoperator households. In contrast, less than a fifth of the white farm population on large-scale operations is in nonoperator households. With the exception of this top sales category, white farm residents are more likely than their black counterparts to be on farms in higher sales classes and blacks on farms in lower sales groups.

Implications—Information on trends and characteristics of farms and farm people has considerable implications regarding a wide range of agricultural programs. Those affected include land use and farm adjustment programs as well as other programs dealing with production and marketing of agricultural goods. Analysts concerned with the allocation of available funds through such programs, and with their effectiveness in dealing with existing problems, need to evaluate the effect of changing numbers and characteristics over time. Similar analysis may also prove valuable to those producing and marketing goods and services needed in farming and by farm people.

Farm population by race, region and selected characteristics of farms

Item	Population in 1977		Percentage change 1970-77[1]
	Number	Percentage distribution	
	Thousands	*Percent*	
United States[2]	8,159	100.0	−18.5
Race			
White	7,755	95.0	−16.7
Black	353	4.3	−46.8
Region			
South	3,081	37.8	−24.6
Other regions	5,078	62.2	−14.6
Tenure of operator			
Full owners	4,544	55.7	−24.2
Part owners	2,871	35.2	−3.4
Tenants and managers	745	9.1	−29.5
Type of farm			
Cash-grain	2,187	26.8	22.6
Tobacco	573	7.0	−19.6
Cotton	181	2.2	−30.3
Other field crops	396	4.8	−2.9
Vegetables	119	1.5	−4.0
Fruit and nut	218	2.7	.5
Livestock	3,168	38.8	−19.8
Poultry	151	1.8	−19.3
Dairy	957	11.7	−17.3
Miscellaneous	209	2.6	−31.5

[1] Change by type of farm relates to 1973-77.
[2] Estimates in this table relate to 48 conterminous States.
Source: June Enumerative Survey, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture.

New Definition Changes Farm Numbers

The adjacent article, with its comparative data, is based on the 1960 farm definition, with certain adjustments of earlier data. This definition treats as farms all places of 10 acres or more that sold $50 or more of farm products in the preceding year, or farms of less than 10 acres from which $250 or more of sales were made.

For several reasons, the 1960 definition had lost some of its validity and usefulness by the mid-1970's. A new and more restrictive definition requires a place to sell $1,000 or more of products to be classed as a farm, with no acreage requirement.

The new definition did not come into use in farm population surveys until 1978, with data only now becoming available. No comparative data will be available for past years, although data are currently being collected on both definitions.

Based on experimental work done by the Department of Agriculture in a national survey in 1975, the farm population under the new definition would have been 7.2 million in that year compared with 8.7 million under the conventional definition. Thus, the effect of the change in definition was to drop 1.5 million people from the farm category, or 17 percent. By nature of the definition change, all of those reclassified as nonfarm lived on places that sold less than $1,000 of agricultural products in the year.

Of the people no longer defined as farm residents under the latest definitional change, 800,000 or 56 percent were in the southern States, where operations producing very small amounts of products for sale have been most numerous. The 16 southern States contained two-fifths of all farms in the Nation but three-fifths of those with sales of $1,000 to $2,499.

The change in definition had little overall effect on the racial composition of the farm population. Under both definitions farm residents were predominantly white (95 percent), but blacks were more affected by definitional change. Nearly a third of the black farm population under the previous definition lived on places that no longer qualify as farms. In contrast, less than a fifth of the whites lived on such places. ▪